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ABSTRACT

With its increasing economic importance throughout the world, Japan has the potential to expand its political influence as well. Generally, however, Japan has been reluctant to use its growing power to influence political affairs both in Asia and in the rest of the world. This digest surveys the factors affecting Japan's role in world affairs, and concludes that the caution and lack of consensus among Japan's political leaders suggests that the impact of Japan's superpower economic status will be constrained by debates and anxieties of both the past and present. A list of nine references is included. This Japan digest is written by an educator for use by teachers to instruct students about Japan, its economy, its international relations, and, particularly, its relations with the United States. The digest is designed to support the upper elementary and secondary school social studies curriculum. (DB)

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JAPAN DIGEST

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The Growing Role of Japan in International Politics and Economics

James Becker

Japan's emergence from the devastation of World War II to become the world's second largest economy has led many political analysts to conclude that the nation will soon be playing an equivalent role on the international political stage. Some observers even predict the emergence of a Japan-led "new world order." These analysts cite the first signs of such a development already in Asia, where Japanese money, technology, and trade predominate. Robert Sutter, an Asian specialist at the Congressional Research Service in Washington, DC states, "Japan is becoming the core economy in Asia, which means relative less influence for the U.S. . . ."

The amount of Japanese investment overseas and the growing dependence on the Japanese market of Asian countries will ultimately have important political implications. But so far, Japan has been reluctant to use their growing power to directly influence the policies of other Asian countries. Moreover, Japan has followed the U.S. lead in matters such as suspending aid and investment following anti-democratic crack-downs in Burma and China.

Japan's economic impact is recognized around the world. But like Kim Doe Jung, at one time the leader of South Korea's largest opposition party, many Asian leaders question whether Japan can lead the world. He states, "Japan has no vision for the future and without that, it cannot really lead the world."

The greatest barrier to Japanese influence in Asia may well come not from the U.S., but from other Asian countries. Nations such as South Korea and China and powerful networks of overseas Chinese businessmen that dominate business in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and much of Southeast Asia may challenge Japanese dominance.

Japan's increasing economic importance and potential for expanding political influence has sparked debate not only in Japan and the rest of Asia, but in other areas of the world. In the United States, a rash of recent books and articles portraying Japan in an unfavorable light suggest that Japan is about to become the new "evil empire." For example, **Rising Sun**, the best selling novel by Michael Crichton mixes fact and fantasy to portray Japan as having a plan to control the United States. The author warns in an afterword that Japan's adversarial trade is intended to wipe out the competition. He also provides the reader with a list of recent non-fiction works to support his claims. However, according to Robert B. Reich, who teaches political economy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, many of the non-fiction books cited by Mr. Crichton mix "factual analyses of Japan's economic strength with hyperbolic visions of Japan's plot to run the United States." He cites, **Agents of Influence** as an example which combines "a thoughtful examination of influence peddling.... [with] a paranoid fantasy about Tokyo's alleged payoffs to influential Americans to achieve effective political domination over the United States."

There is no question that in the last several years Japan has taken on a more global role, helping to define policies related to issues such as debt or the environment. At the same time, Japanese political leaders have seldom taken the lead in proposing solutions to post Cold War challenges. They generally have urged cooperation among world leaders and have sought to strengthen cooperative efforts with the United States. In April 1992, Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, noted that although the Cold War was over the "world has yet to create a new order for true global peace." He cited the environment, narcotics trafficking, the gap between the rich and the poor, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, issues as "awesome" as the Cold War itself. The Prime Minister stated "we will not be able to solve any of these issues unless we, Japanese and Americans, cooperate very closely together in search of solutions . . . on all levels and in all areas . . . pooling our knowledge, experiences, and resources."

Increasing Japanese involvement in world affairs may worry many Americans, but recent U.S. administrations have encouraged it. Secretary of State James Baker has called for a "global partnership" exemplified by joint U.S.-Japan efforts to aid the Philippines. In fact, Japan has provided more aid to the Philippines than any other government.

The Gulf War made apparent the ambivalent attitudes in the U.S. regarding Japan's role in the international arena. While the U.S. applauded Japan's condemnation of Iraq's invasion and their support of economic sanctions, they

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criticized Japan's support for the military effort as indecisive and inconsistent. Some Americans also noted the importance of electronics on the battlefield and cited the arms makers' dependence on Japanese-manufactured micro-chips and materials as a dangerous situation for U.S. national security.

In Japan, there is continuing debate about what steps should be taken to implement its pledge to join with Washington in a "global partnership." Teumasa Nakanishi, professor of International Relations at the University of Shiyouka says, "The cold war is at an end, but Japanese don't really know how to disengage from it.....We lack any kind of national consensus." While U.S. citizens complained that Japan did not do enough to help the allied efforts in the Gulf War, many Japanese felt their contribution was excessive. Writing in the Japanese newspaper **Tokyo Shimbun**, Toshino, cites the dilemma of Japan wanting to be a reliable ally and at the same time its reluctance to support war in any form.

Japan has balked at supporting the proposed economic bailout of the former Soviet Union republics. The dispute over four tiny islands in the Kurile chain, seized from Japan by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II, continues to plague efforts to improve relations between Japan and Russia. Japan was a reluctant partner in western efforts to put together a package of assistance to the former Soviet Republics. The growing trade imbalance with South Korea and Japan's dismissal of claims for compensation by South Korean women who claim they were kidnapped and forced to be slaves for Japanese troops during the war has increased tension between those two countries.

In the case of Cambodia where United Nations peacekeeping efforts are underway, Japan is expected to pay some of the costs of stationing U.N. troops there. However, it is unlikely that Japan will send its own troops to the area. The idea of Japanese troops going overseas for the first time since WWII is a highly sensitive issue in Japan as well as in other Asian countries.

The Japanese want a more equal partnership with the U.S., but there is little serious discussion of breaking with U.S. foreign policy. Recent high level economic meetings in Washington where the U.S. pressed Japan and Germany to do more to spur the world economy ended with both nations suggesting that Washington should deal with its own economic problems before telling others what to do. Certainly the role of Japan in world affairs and its relationship to the U.S. is changing and is the subject of much debate and speculation. However in practice, it has often been that the U.S. defines the goals, and policies, while Japan contributes much of the money. The lingering Korean and Chinese resentments, and the caution and lack of consensus among Japan's political leaders suggest that the impact of Japan's superpower economic status will be constrained by the debates and anxieties in both the past and present. While Japan's economic influence seems likely to guarantee it a major role in global affairs, its role as a dominant political force remains uncertain.

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